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ABSTRACT

Four Native American poets in easy narrative style tell about some of the aesthetic judgments they make in their work and, in the process, shed some light upon the traditions from which their poetry emerges. Joy Harjo discusses how she wrote "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window," her use of repetition influenced by music and preaching, and her vision of Indian women who inspired the poem. Maurice Kenny describes the illness which evoked associations for the poem "Wild Strawberry" and the significance of the strawberry for the Iroquois people. Simon J. Ortiz relates the conversation which inspired his political poem, "That's the Place Indians Talk About," the revision process used to rework the poem, and the narrative technique chosen for this work. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn comments on her poem, "Survival." Texts of all four poems are included. (NEC)

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THE CREATIVE PROCESS

To the readers of modern poetry, Amerindian works have gained significant recognition in the last decade or so. Some important collections like Angle of Geese and *Gourd Dancer* by N. Scott Momaday and *Going for the Rain* by Simon J. Ortiz hold a firm and comfortable place on our library shelves. In the following pages, four Native poets (Ortiz, Kenny, Cook and Harjo) in easy narrative style tell us about some of the aesthetic judgments they make in their work and, and in the process, throw some light upon the traditions from which their poetry emerges.

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The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window

Published in She Had Some Horses *by Joy Harjo, Thunder's Mouth Press, NY.*

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor
window. Her hands are pressed white against the
concrete moulding of the tenement building. She
hangs from the 13th floor window in east Chicago,
with a swirl of birds over her head. They could
be a halo, or a storm of glass waiting to crush her.

She thinks she will be set free.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor window
on the east side of Chicago is not alone.
She is a woman of children, of the baby, Carlos,
and of Margaret, and of Jimmy who is the oldest.
She is her mother's daughter and her father's son.
She is several pieces between the two husbands
she has had. She is all the women of the apartment
building who stand watching her, watching themselves.

When she was young she ate wild rice on scraped down
plates in warm wood rooms. It was in the farther
north and she was the baby then. They rocked her.
She sees Lake Michigan lapping at the shores of
herself. It is a dizzy hole of water and the rich
live in tall glass houses at the edge of it. In some
places Lake Michigan speaks softly, here, it just sputters
and butts itself against the asphalt. She sees
other buildings just like hers. She sees other
women hanging from many-floored windows
counting their lives in the palms of their hands
and in the palms of their children's hands.

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window
on the Indian side of town. Her belly is soft from
her children's births, her worn levis swing down below
her waist, and then her feet, and then her heart.
She is dangling.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor hears voices.
They come to her in the night when the lights have gone
dim. Sometimes they are little cats mewing and scratching
at the door, sometimes they are her grandmother's voice,
and sometimes they are gigantic men of light whispering
to her to get up, to get up, to get up. That's when she wants
to have another child to hold onto in the night, to be able
to fall back into dreams.

And the woman hanging from the 13th floor window
hears other voices. Some of them scream out from below
for her to jump, they would push her over. Others cry softly
from the sidewalks, pull their children up like flowers and gather
them into their arms. They would help her, like themselves.

But she is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window,
and she knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her
own skin, her own thread of indecision.

She thinks of Carlos, of Margaret, of Jimmy.
She thinks of her father, and of her mother.
She thinks of all the women she has been, of all
the men. She thinks of the color of her skin, and
of Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines.
She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms.
Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars.
She thinks of the 4 a.m. lonelinesses that have folded
her up like death, discordant, without logical and
beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges.
She would speak.

The woman hangs from the 13th floor window crying for
the lost beauty of her own life. She sees the
sun falling west over the grey plane of Chicago
She thinks she remembers listening to her own life
break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor
window on the east side of Chicago, or as she
climbs back up to claim herself again.

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How did this poem begin?

This poem began two years before I began writing it, during a trip to Chicago to visit friends, see the King Tut exhibit and look for other Indians. I found the Chicago Indian Center at nearly dusk. It could have been any other urban Indian center, the same part of the city, a color like lost dreams, air tasting like a borrowed hope, and always the ragged pool tables where kids acting twice their age shoot pool downhill all day.

One particular image stayed with me for two years, and it probably wasn't exactly what I saw, but changed, transformed with living. And it wasn't the most significant image I remember, or it didn't appear to be, but something about that one small room, hardly anyone in it, a western window with no curtains, maybe a few toothless venetian blinds, and a rocking chair, especially that bony rocking chair with stuffing coming out of the padding, and the sun falling behind a horizon of skyscrapers, triggered the poem, the story in it.

What still strikes me about the remembering is not knowing whether "for real" anyone had been rocking in that rocking chair, but everytime I remember it I remember a young woman nursing a baby, or an old man with a greasy paper sack on his leaning back, softly breathing; or two kids rocking it hard and being warned to slow it down; or that old woman at forty who watched the sunset as receding light across the floor; or the other one laughing at her sister's terrible jokes; or anyone I may have seen or not seen in that rocking chair.

The woman hanging from the thirteenth floor window could have been in that chair, just hours before, letting that steady rhythm calm her, a heartbeat against wood, trying to dream her own regeneration, so that any kind of hopelessness wouldn't be overwhelming.

Out of this the poem took root, two years before the actual writing began.

I wrote the poem one afternoon as I sat at my desk in my office at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, after I pulled out a sheath of papers one of which had a note on it about the Chicago Indian Center, something quickly scribbled about the rocking chair, that room.

It was probably one of the quicker poems I have written, in terms of getting its basic structure down, the basic line of it. And unusual in the sense that I kept feeling her there, standing behind me, urging me on.

What changes did you make?

I don't recall all the changes I made after the first draft of the poem, but there were many. I probably wound up with at least 20 pages of revision and then some. These days when I write it's even more revision. To me that is much of the art of writing, the craft of it, taking care that the language fits, that what is meant is clear in terms of what is evoked in the reader, the listener, and what is spoken is said so beautifully even when speaking into moments/events that I have to painfully see.

As a poet I feel that it is my responsibility to be clear and alive in my work, to not add to the confusion.

What techniques did you use?

One technique I often use, and use in "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" is that of repetition. For me it is a way of speaking that can, if used effectively, make the poem lift off the page and enter into the listener much like a song or a chant. Repetition has always been used, ceremonially, in telling stories, in effective speaking, so that what is said becomes a litany, and gives you a way to enter in to what is being said, and a way to emerge whole, but changed.

Also important as to why a certain technique would be appealing to a particular poet and/or poem has much to do with background, culture, family histories. What I call my influences in terms of writing are a combination of many musics, including: country western songs, like the ones my mother played on the radio, jukeboxes and often sang around the house: preaching, such as that done by Creek preachers, like that one of my Creek grandfather Marcy Harjo; Creek Stomp Dance songs; jazz, which I know my tribe had something to do with it's beginnings, coming like we do from

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Alabama and places south just listen to our music; early Motown we played at Indian school, danced to it and knew all the words; and always the heartbreaking blues.

Who is your audience?

Who I saw when I closed my eyes and wrote this poem were women, mostly Indian women, those who survived and those who weren't strong enough (whose words we'll always have to carry), the ones who speak through me, and even those who hate me for speaking. I saw women who were holding many children, others embracing lovers, some dancing the stomp dance and others swinging hard out on some spinning dance floor. Heard much weeping, and even more laughter.

I think I always write with especially these women in mind because I want us all to know as women, as Indian people, as human beings that there is always hope, that we are whole, alive, and precious.

Can this poem be paraphrased?

Yes. It is basically easy to paraphrase, whereas other poems I have written would be nearly impossible to paraphrase. It goes like this: an Indian woman from Wisconsin who has come into Chicago to make a living, because she can't at home, is hanging by her hands from her apartment building. She is desperate, feels alone, and at the moment the poem begins has difficulty seeing her life fit clearly, with any kind of beautiful meaning.

She watches her life pass in front of her. Thinks especially of her children, and of her home, and knows that where she is from Lake Michigan speaks another tone of voice because she has sat on the lake shore and listened long and hard to the stories. Here in Chicago Lake Michigan speaks more desperately as it slams itself against the concrete along the edge of the waterfront. She, too, feels the city as abrupt, hard.

She sees people gather below her and knows herself as many of the women who are watching. Even though there are those who are screaming for her to jump I like to feel she sees other possibilities in those who, "pull their children up like flowers and gather them into their arms," in those who remember life, and can tell their own survival.

The end of the poem I left deliberately ambiguous. The listener doesn't know whether she jumped, or whether she pulled herself back up. I've always liked stories that were able to accomplish that kind of ending well. There aren't too many of them. "The Lady or the Tiger" is one. That kind of ending can work as long as there is still a resolution in the ambiguity.

A personal comment

Many people have come up to me after a poetry reading and asked me about this woman who was hanging from the thirteenth floor window, because they were sure they knew her, or one of her cousins, her sister, or they had read about the story in the newspaper where they lived, be it New York or Lincoln Nebraska, or Albuquerque. It was familiar to them, haunted them after hearing the poem because it evoked some possible memory.

I know there is a woman, perhaps many women are this woman. And you know her, or thought you did, or will. Because it's a story that has happened, perhaps it's happening now.

Wild Strawberry

by Maurice Kenny

For Helene

And I rode the Greyhound down to Brooklyn
where I sit now eating woody strawberries
grown on the backs of Mexican farmers
imported from the fields of their hands,
juices without color or sweetness.

my wild blood berries of spring meadows
sucked by June bees and protected by hawks
have stained my face and honeyed
my tongue . . . healed the sorrow in my flesh

vines crawl across the grassy floor
of the north, scatter to the world
seeking the light of the sun and innocent
tap of the rain to feed the roots
and bud small white flowers that in June

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will burst fruit and announce spring
when wolf will drop winter fur
and wrens will break the egg

*

my blood, blood berries that brought laughter
and the ache in the stooped back that vied
with dandelions for the plucking,
and the wines nourished our youth and heralded
iris, corn and summer melon
we fought bluebirds for the seeds
armed against garter snakes, field mice;
won the battle with the burning sun
which blinded our eyes and froze our hands
to the vines and the earth where knees knelt
and we laughed in the morning dew like worms
and grubs; we scented age and wisdom

my mother wrapped the wounds of the world
with a sassafras poultice and we ate
wild berries with their juices running
down the roots of our mouths and our joy

I sit here in Brooklyn eating Mexican
berries which I did not pick, nor do
I know the hands which did, nor their stories . . .
January snow falls, listen . . .

How did this poem begin?

In the winter of 1978, January to be exact, living in Brooklyn Heights in New York City I was ill. A close friend and nearby neighbor had the goodness of heart and thought to bring to my sick bed a basket of cultivated strawberries. Helene knew my fondness for the fruit and just how important the strawberry is to me and my poetry. The wild strawberry is not only the first natural fruit of the eastern spring, but it is the symbol of life to Iroquois people. The strawberry does hold strong significance for all the people of the Six Nations and for myself as a person, as a Mohawk writer and as both an editor and publisher. In 1976 I established Strawberry Press to be an exclusively Native American Press to publish the poetry and art of Native People. There were, and remain still today, other Native Americans who publish Indian writing, but not exclusively. Joseph Bruchac of the Greenfield Review and Press, of Abanaiki descent himself, indeed, publishes many Native American writers and it may well be the press's thrust but he also publishes Black, Chicano, Asian, Anglo and African writers. William Oandasan, Yuki/Filipino, publishes "A" Press and Magazine likewise prints the works of a multicultural group of authors. Bro. Benet Tvedten, deserving high praise for his Blue Cloud Quarterly and Press, has published more Native American writers, and others on related subjects, than anyone. Yet, Bro. Benet is of Swedish abstraction.

As I rallied from the illness, and while biting into those cultivated berries, sucking juices, I began to realize, to remember the many mornings of my childhood at home in northern New York State when I would follow my mother and two older sisters into the flowering fields where the wild strawberry vines crawled under the sun.

Strawberrying

morning
broods
in the wide river
Mama bends
light
bleeds
always
in her day of
picking
(our fields are stained)
the moon, bats
tell us
to go
in the scent of
berries
fox
awaken
in stars
1979*

With their children other women, often my mother's friends, would be there picking and filling their baskets. It was a good time. Burning hot that it was in those open meadows breezes did rush the grasses and flowers from off either Lake Ontario or the St. Lawrence River. It was a time of laughter, jokes and teasing, cries and tears from we children bored with the labor and eager for a river swim, and certainly a time of not only filling the belly with the deliciously honeysweet fruit, dripping in ripeness, but a time when the women exchanged, what I thought were stories, gossip. I am convinced that was the reason they came to the fields. Even

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then, in 1934-35, those many years back cultivated berries could be bought at roadside stands or in the village markets.

Also while eating the berries in my sick bed I recalled a strong sentiment of the Lakota Holy Man, Black Elk:

"When the ceremony was over, everybody felt a great deal better, for it had been a day of fun. They were better able now to see the greenness of the world, the wideness of the sacred day, the colors of the earth, and to set these in their minds."**

There is no doubt in my mind that picking wild strawberries was a ceremony, and to this day has offered me a better look at the grasses of the world, the width of a sacred day, and certainly the "colors of the earth." Picking those berries enriched not only our everyday lives and bellies but imaginations and spirits as well. We all, even the children, truly felt better later. I wanted to write of this good feeling, this betterment and enrichment.

This year, winter 1983, strawberries were shipped air freight to the United States from Chile, in South America . . . a long way from the home meadows of the north. Obviously air freighted fruit must be harvested rather green, and need to complete the cycle en route. And, so, too, the berries in the basket which Helene had brought to me in January of 1978. The straw basket was stamped with purple ink: "Hecho En Mexico" . . . meaning, made in Mexico. This sent my thoughts and concerns reeling. I knew that much of the fruit bought in New York City winter markets are raised in Mexico. The peaches, watermelons, cantaloupe, and berries are raised in the Mexican State of Sonora. I have spent large chunks of time in Mexico. I also knew that these fruits, and especially the strawberries, were grown with the side of chemical fertilizers, chemicals that could and surely would cause great pain to the people working those fields with bare hands. So as I sat in my bed popping berries into my dry mouth I recognized the horrendous fact that people were possibly dying, people I did not personally know, nor never would; people were dying so that I could eat those terrible berries in a winter city, an unnatural time to be eating strawberries. And they were terrible. Large that they were, at least an inch in circumference, they were tasteless. Below the bright red skin the flesh was colorless, pale white. I did thank my friend profusely, but once she had left, I not only threw the wretched fruit out but vowed I'd never eat Mexican strawberries again unless I personally knew the hands that raised and picked them for the table, and especially those harvested in Sonora.

Directly, I was not the cause of this pain to the workers in Sonora. I'm sufficiently realistic to comprehend this. My purchasing these fruits decidedly encouraged the use of not only the chemical fertilizers but the deaths of men and women, probably children as well. I was acutely aware that they, the harvesters, could not enjoy the labors as we had when I was a child of those northern meadows, meadows etched by blackeyed susan, purple clover, dandelion; meadows sung to by wrens, larks, blue jays; meadows that in the continuum not only supported our desires for fresh fruit, but supported our strengths as a people and as a Nation for the wild strawberry was given to us by the "little people" who live in a quarry for the pleasure of eating and to be used in a healing ceremony.

December ***

Set up the drum.

Winter's on the creek.

Dark men sit in dark kitchens.
Words move the air
A neighbor is sick.
Needs prayer.

Women thaw frozen
strawberries.

In the dark room . . . a drum.

Kids hang out
eating burgers
at McDonalds.
The Williams boy
is drunk.

Set up the drum.

Berries thaw,
are crushed,
fingers stained, and tongues.

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Set up the drum.
A neighbor is sick.
Say a prayer.
Dark men sit in dark kitchens.

Wind rattles the moon.

While nibbling those horrible cultivated berries I became enraged with the conglomerate fruit companies, as Neruda had years ago, which control the lives of those Mexican farmers who scratch out a meager livelihood from the sands, and I was discouraged with my own self.

What changes did you make?

Originally the poem was a great deal longer. I have not preserved either the first or early drafts which had been copied into a notebook now destroyed. But I recall it was entitled, "Ceremony," and ran, as a chant, into three or four pages. I wrote in a fury and words sprawled across the lined pages like berry vines. I have composed numerous chants best heard on the ear rather than read on the page and consequently I first felt "Ceremony" was meant to be another chant. The title was indicative to the poem's direction. I had titled it before writing down the first lines. Ceremony: meaning prayer, music, song, dance, ritual. I would not only offer a thanksgiving to the strawberries, and life under the rejuvenating sun itself, to the Creator, but a prayer for the workers in those commercial Sonoran fields. I would sing this prayer or chant and incorporate, as I had been doing with other poems at that time, not merely a music but dance in the beat, the meter of the line. In repetition, I would invoke the "little people" to come to the aide of those farmers; I would invoke the spirit of those who had passed away because of the chemicals; I would invoke the memory of my mornings of June meadows when I'd picked beside my mother and sisters. I would produce a political lyric in the form of a chant.

In 1977 Leslie Marmon Silko, the Laguna poet and novelist, published her incredibly beautiful *Ceremony*. Naturally, I read it, and was not only well acquainted with the context and ideas of the work, but was deeply aware of the ceremony underlining her intentions. The very first draft of my own "Wild Strawberry" was dedicated to Leslie because of the influence she had had on the makings of a poem. In a way, I'd suppose, it was rather an affirmation of Leslie's ingenious power in her novel, *Ceremony*, that spurred my poem, and the thrust of her foundation and form and poetic language which encouraged me. So the dedication was an obvious testimony of my great and abiding respect for Leslie Silko's creativity. There, then, is when the thought process changed, and the poem heavily rethought, revised, reshaped. It was a matter of selection as all good poetry is a matter of selection: the most telling phrase, image of widest connotation, symbol of depth and metaphor of width; the right words in the right place. I chose to compose a circle of worddancers that would ripple out to encompass many worlds and all people, my residence in Brooklyn, the commercial fields in Mexico, my childhood and home, the past and rite.

And I rode the Greyhound down to Brooklyn
where I sit eating woody strawberries
grown on the backs of Mexican farmers
imported from the fields of their hands,
juices without color or sweetness"

It had to be a catching first line, a startling opening stanza. Riding a Greyhound would surely cause a reader to pause. The first line *must* begin with a conjunction to designate a past, a prefix, a preface. The last line was destined to end with an elipse to suggest continuum of birth and death, prayer and rite, song and story, time's cycle of seasons . . . winter to winter. And for a poem within a poem, a flashback, a frame was constructed of Brooklyn and Mexican images within which the poet sat eating berries and reminiscing of a long ago time, an innocent time, perhaps a traditional and ritualistic time, and a time frought with joy and pleasure, hope and a future though not void of pain and labor such as the Mexican farmers were then, and probably now, knew. As Black Elk suggests, a fresh time in which we will be "better able to see the greenness of the

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world, the wideness of the sacred day, the colors of the earth." And we would feel "a great deal better."

Pain and labor leading to feeling "better," and the differences between two opposing sets of pain and labor would be the contact between the poet and the worker . . . not the strawberry which would be the larger image/symbol of rejuvenation. Blood would become the central word or sound: blood or juice of the wild berry, blood of my ancestors and the Nation, blood of my blood of the future, blood as sweet as wild berries; blood of the workers in the Mexican fields, their blood corroded and eaten, or sucked dry by the cancer resulting from the chemical fertilizers; blood spilled . . . so to speak. Governmental genocide of Indian peoples is never too far from my mind as its history is so long and the possible present reality a permanent fact. I could have composed a poem dealing with Indian people working in the uranium mines in the southwest and the horrors produced upon their contaminated bodies and minds. There is a certain shock appeal by using the word "blood," especially when reading poems aloud to an audience. It suggests continuity and both family and clan ties, and in my work it should suggest the Iroquois Confederacy, or the League of Six Nations as founded by Daganawidah and Ayonwatha, the Mohawk prophet and his spokesperson. Blood must suggest war, death, violence, the massacres of Indian people across history since the European came to this land, Turtle's back, America. Blood is powerful.

I dropped the title, "Ceremony," changed the form from an oral chant to a free verse lyric and commenced revisions, redrafting, the blue print, the poem's foundation. Under the first title, "Ceremony" the poem flowed in a somewhat stream-of-consciousness technique or pattern. Now structured it tended to be more deliberate, less instinctive, inspirational and free flowing. It hardens like taffy pulled by buttered hands, or, perhaps more apt, like jam cooking to a firm for preserving. Words rather than chanting sounds bore the meaning and became drops of jelly in the belly of the poem. I purposely chose images that most readers could easily relate to and identify with, such as spring meadows, June bees, bluebirds, and the like. I also placed in with the images Iroquois traditional symbols: hawks flying close to the spirit world; garter snakes, mundane, close to the ground; wolf, a Mohawk clan, and a clan more associated with spirit, medicine and healing than the other two clans, etc.

The poem was finished in a few days. It was not published until the collection *Dancing Back Strong The Nation* (Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1979) appeared. "Wild Strawberry" has been translated into Japanese, Creation and Dutch.

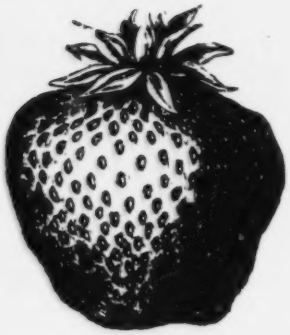
Can this poem be paraphrased?

Perhaps, but best not by myself. I believe that Paula Gunn Allen in her introduction to the collection adequately sums it up:

> The volume moves with the consciousness of the poet recovering what has been lost, first articulating what that is, then how it came to be lost, then exploring the exact dimensions of the grief, pain and anger that must accompany loss. In the end a resolution occurs . . . simultaneously celebrate the past by finding it in a meaningless present.
>
> In this fusion, the poet discovers for himself and for us the real meaning of past and present, for the snow falls in Brooklyn as on the reservation, and there are stories everywhere, if we hear.

"January snow falls, listen . . ."

"Wild Strawberry" is a richly important poem to me and is the centerpiece of all my work; it is like the berry plant vine itself crawling across the floor of spring meadows seeking the light of the sun.



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That's the Place Indians Talk About

by Simon J. Ortiz

We go up there and camp.
Several days, we stay there.
We have to take horses, wagons,
or walk.
And we would stay
for the days we have to.

The Coso Hot Springs would talk to us.
And we would talk to it.
The People have to talk to it.
That's the place Indians talk about.
That's the place.

Children, women, men,
we would all go up there.
You drink that water, it makes you well.
You put it on your hands, face, all over
and you get well, all well.
That's the place Indians talk about,
the Coso Hot Springs the People go to.

You take a flint like this,
a hard stone in your hand,
and you give it like this.
When you pray.
When you sing.
When you talk to the hot springs.
You talk with it when it talks to you.

Something from there,
from down in there is talking to you.
You could hear it.
You listen.
Listen.
You can hear it.
The stones in the earth rattling together.

The stones down there moving around each other.
When we pray.
When we sing.
When we talk with the stones
rattling in the ground
and the stones moving in the ground.
That's the place Indians talk about.

Oh,
we stay there for some days.
You could hear it talking.
From far,
from far away inside, the moving power.
From far away, coming to us,
coming to us pretty soon.
Getting closer, getting close,
the power is getting close,
and the ground is hot and shaking.

Something is doing that
and the People know that.
They have to keep talking.
Praying, that's the Indian way.
Singing, that's the Indian way.
And pretty soon, it's there.
You know it's all around.
It's right there,
and the People are right there.
That's the place Indians talk about.

And now,
they have a fence around the Coso Hot Springs.
We go up there, but they have a fence around.
They have a government fence all around Coso Hot Springs.
Since World War II, the Navy of the government
has a fence around that place.
The People go up there to talk with the hot springs,
to use the power, to keep ourselves well with,
but there is a fence with locks up there all around,
and we have to talk with the Navy people
so they can let us inside the fence to the hot springs.

We go up there to talk with the hot springs power
but the Navy tells us we have to talk to them.
We don't like it, to have to do that.
We don't want to talk to the government fence,
the government Navy.
That's the place the Indian people are talking about now.
For many years,
the People went up there.
Families from all over.
From Nevada, from Utah, from Arizona,
from north California, from south,
from all over, from anyplace.
Families have to travel by horses,
wagons, and now by cars, and walking.
We keep going up there,
for all this many years, we have to.
To keep talking to the power
of the power in the earth, we have to.
That's the Indian way.

We don't like to talk to the fence and the Navy
but for a while we will and pretty soon
we will talk to the hot springs power again.
That's the place the Indians talk about.

Listen,
that's the way you hear.
Pretty soon, you can hear it,
coming far away
deep in the ground, deep down there coming,
the voice of the power coming,
closer and closer.
Listen, that's the way you hear it.
From the earth,

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the moving power of the voice
and the People talking.
Praying, you know, singing soft too.

Hearing,
that's the way you listen.
The People talking,
telling the power to come to them
and pretty soon it will come.
It will come,
the moving power of the voice,
the moving power of the earth,
the moving power of the People.
That's the place Indian People talk about.

How did this poem begin?

Like a number of poems I have written, it began with a conversation. That is, I got the idea, theme and topic, and the actual substance from the conversation I was having with a Paiute man in Bishop, California. There was a meeting going on about Coso Hot Springs. Before the meeting, people were getting acquainted, and I struck up a conversation with this elder man. I told him where I was from in New Mexico, and he told me he had never been there, and then a bit later, as we leaned up against a car, he told me about Coso Hot Springs. He kept repeating the phrase, "That's the place Indians talk about, that's the place." And it struck me how important that "place" was not only as a physical, geographical locale but also the "place" that is spiritual, that is historical, emotional fact and experience. And then it is all tied together and is made immediate in the sense that we were at this meeting and that we were talking together. And, even more important and significant, this is the very way of life that Indian people know and must make a statement about. So the poem is basically that, a statement which is a political cultural stand. For me, conversations have always been important beginning points for me. I don't mean speeches or orations, but ordinary conversations that people have, when they are most intimately together in language, when the dynamic of words, ideas, emotions, reactions are most vital and immediate. How the voice is used, what gestures are made, the setting, the topic, etc., all of these are important to the event of the "conversation," and when I listen and learn I see myself as a participant in the event, even perhaps when I am merely overhearing something being said. In the case of this poem, I was an actual participant in the conversation and the "place that Indians talk about." Later, when I wrote the poem, the words and line order seemed to be a way of re-experiencing what was going on in the original sense. I realize that in another, very close way that it was not merely re-enactment of speech, emotion, setting and so forth, but actually a way of original experiencing in terms of words, of language. For me, even six years later, the experience of what is meant by the various ideas of "place" is very strong. I hear, feel, know the moving power of the voice and the earth. That is the deeper and most intimate beginning of the poem I think.

What changes did you make?

Changes I don't remember. But I know there are always changes, i.e., revisions, restatements, reworking, etc. The first changes probably happen even before it is written. I think I wrote it down on a notepad, probably very briefly, perhaps only the central/focal point, "that's the place." Something that would recreate for me the essences of not only the words, language, ideas but also the image of the elderly Paiute man, the setting, my reactions. Sometime after I must have written more of a complete narrative which I would designate as a poem, I made more definite changes. In this case, the changes had to do with expanding upon the varied meaning of "places." That is, I was more specific about the meanings, making distinctions. For example, the first meaning is terrestrial, a physical place, a hot springs in the lower California Sierras. That's the place the Paiute man told me that the people went to. And then he explained another meaning of that springs, that it was a healing place, a spiritual setting where people went to renew and reheal themselves. Where they sang, prayed, talked with the power of that place, the earth. And then it's a place in the sense of a dynamic relationship, i.e., the people talking, the ground talking, the stones moving

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around, the people moving around. "Something is doing that," he said, and I've heard many Indian people saying that in religious narrations and discussions about life in general. And then, of course, I made an obvious reference, and a point of it, to the "political" place that Indian people are talking about now. I relate that to the place that is physical, which is locked up behind government fences, and further expand or extend it to the conclusive meaning, the place that will be arrived at, i.e., the "place" of moving power of the earth, voice, people. So changes here had most to do with the effect I wanted "place" to have, having the various meanings come strongly apparent, be directed specifically, always being aware of the overall impact I wanted the poem to have.

How revisions are made have to do with decisions affecting specific focus, especially visual images used in the poem. I wanted water, ground, flint, and hands, faces to be very apparent, and then later on, the image of the fence and locks to make a point. The same way with the words that show action, movement, the verbs such as "talk," drink, pray, sing, and further the phrases, "rattling in the ground," "the ground is hot and shaking," "the people are right there," "we will talk to the power again," concluding with "pretty soon it will come. It will come." These words and phrases, images and action verbs are chosen very deliberately and placed in the order that will most completely achieve the effect and meaning I intend. It builds up to the "place" that is meant, the meanings and message that I intend. Decisions have to do with selection of words, phrases, images, but it is more than that too. I wanted the poem to be meditative but also "active," in the sense that the reader can be inspired to make a decision, feel something of the message conveyed, and agree with the source of the "moving power." That's why I decided to end it with the words "listen" and "hearing" set prominently featured and intended to be reinforced by the process that is involved in hearing and listening. The poem is very active and energetic up to that point and then it becomes combined with a meditative mood there as I want the reader and listener to be aware of the dynamic of language and its power. From that point on, I think my decision to structure the poem in such a way as to make its conclusion or climax obvious has to do most with the directed energy so far, strongly released through the "moving power" which is the place Indian people talk about. I think those are some of the more obvious items I considered in deciding upon the changes after I had drafted the poem and having decided how it might best work.

What techniques did you use?

The main technique I am aware of whenever I read the poem aloud is the narrate, because that is the way I heard it in the original experience, the event of the conversation and the dialogue held. The narrative technique, which to me is simply the storytelling style of talking, is very effective because it provides its own setting, the particular mood intended, and requires a certain immediacy of language which is provided by the storyteller or narrator. In this particular poem the narrator is the poet and the character of the elderly Paiute man and eventually the poem's voice itself. In trying to render the voice of the narrative poem most effectively, i.e., in creating the experience of the poem, I'm aware of the particular words used for their sound and motion, the images conveyed, the special nuances and emphasis of language as spoken by the narrator, and the patterns or rhythms of speech. First, I think I wanted a certain kind of formality, like in a meditation or prayer, or even an oration though not strictly so except to have the listener focus upon the words. Secondly, I intended for it to use what is most effective and beautiful about the oral tradition, that is the immediacy and intimacy of language. Spoken expression draws you into the center of expression and perception. Thirdly, I wanted to create a distinct identity for the poem as a whole; I think it is important for that to happen in this case. I wanted to make it special in terms of who "we" are when I write: "When we pray. When we sing." So I say it very

obviously in "that's the Indian way." as well as using repetition and certain tonal effects to achieve a ritual-chant prayer poem. I did not want to limit it, of course, to the poem only having an Indian identity, and "the People" includes all people. Fourthly, the narrative technique stresses the rhythms of spoken language, and that, to me, has to do with breathing (inhalation and exhalation sequences), accents on certain words (emphasis), body language in general. For example, I hear and see "Listen, that's the way you hear." and "Hearing, that's the way you listen" very clearly in terms of breathing, emphasis, and body motion. I can't remember exactly what the Paiute man did in our conversation but I can almost see his hand and arm movements and the particular breathing that accompanied the words. This last point is especially important for me to consider when I try to write a poem and deliver it orally. I "sound" out the words and stanzas as I write them down, so that I become aware of the weight of the sounds and syllables and rhythms of speech. Line lengths are decided upon accordingly, and, in fact, when I do a reading this poem is especially engrossing physically, almost demanding of all my energy, and I have to take a long deep breath when I finish. I think that I try to listen to everything that the poem is telling me when I am writing it down. Maybe that is the main principle—listening and hearing—I am aware of when I write certain poems. After I finished the poem, I became aware that the narrative style changed when reference was made to the "fence around Coso Hot Springs" and became awkward and harsh but regained it's meditative composure in the last two stanzas. This is some evidence that the poet sometimes isn't always aware of the techniques involved in writing, but something is happening intuitively at any rate and is effective in creating poetic impact.

Who was your audience?

Anybody who reads, listens, feels. Anybody, but maybe Indian people particularly since I always try to focus upon the relationships among all of us. Especially in identifying with this "place" that is significant in this poem. A couple of times when I have performed the poem, I have had people come up to me and say, "I know that place." Once in Albuquerque, I read it and afterwards was approached by a Sioux man from South Dakota. He was about eighty years old, and he said, "I know that place you was talking about, I know it." And, initially thinking he was referring to Coso Hot Springs specifically, I asked him if he'd been there at the place. He said he had and told me that when he was a boy this high about a hundred years ago (laughing) an old man said to him: come here. When he walked over the old man started to unravel a tanned hide bundle and finally arrived at a small black stone at the center of the bundle. The old man said, "Don't touch it, just look at it," and he put it on the ground and he said, Listen to it and talk to it, that's the power of the earth, that's the place. I've been there, I know that place, the Sioux man said to me. So he had been there though not to Coso Hot Springs. He knew that place that is common to us, that exists in all of us, that we all share with our concerns. It is something that we can identify with, that place. And as I said, it does not mean only Indian people.

Another time when I read it, a young woman came up to me and said, "I know that man." I smiled, knowing what she meant. She meant the Paiute man, of course, but also someone familiar and warm to us, someone beloved and very dear. We all know that person, man or woman, because "that place that Indians talk about" has sustained us and will always sustain us if we cherish and honor it. As a poet, it is important for me to strive to have my poems reestablish and reaffirm relationships among ourselves as a community of people and that community to know itself in relationship to all other forms of life, especially the land. My audience in that sense is that community of land and people. I think I regard this view as a main principle behind my writing efforts, i.e., why I write. Hopefully this is achieved to some measure in this particular poem.

Can this poem be paraphrased?

In several instances, I have paraphrased the poem, and it can be done because of the narrative technique upon which it is based. It is like a story which can be retold and made anew each time it is told. I think it can be done especially in terms of the intent of the poem, reflecting upon the philosophy behind the theme expressed by the phrase, "that's the place Indian people talk about." It can be related to other expressions of one's awareness of community, the environment, and cultural attitudes. Although it has a particular Indian identity, it certainly relates to the concerns felt by all those who have concern for the earth and the social and political struggle involved in expressing it. When the poem is paraphrased, this concern becomes evident I feel because of the inherent strength, sincerity, and direct nature of its theme. At least, I hope so. Other examples can be brought up which help the paraphrased poem along. There should be no problem in paraphrasing the poem.

A personal comment

This poem is a political poem because it makes a stand for what is important to me and to others: for land and people and life. It is important, I think, to identify the poem as such so there will be no doubt. When that elder Paiute man, the ex-migrant laborer and rangerider said, "That's the place Indian people talk about," he meant to convey a political message, a very direct, simple, clear message. There was no mistaking what he meant. There is no mistaking what Indian people have meant in their defense of land and life. There is no mistaking the moving power of the voice, earth, and the people. Often we hear that poetry is made "less poetic" if it expresses and insists upon a political point of view and purpose, but I suspect that designation is made by those who do not want to hear the truth spoken by those who defend the earth. How can there be no poetry in the voice that speaks for the very essence, the moving power, of life? Poetry is a way of engendering life, and that is a political stand when it is against what will take away life, when it is against the government fence all around Coso Hot Springs. Much of Native American poetry is poetry of protest, resistance poetry, part of the liberation and decolonization movement which is worldwide. Resistance and liberation literature has been an important element in the struggles of former colonized peoples to affirm their national lands, cultures, and governments. Poetry spoken and written by indigenous and oppressed populations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Mid-East has inspired the overall social struggles and movements for liberation and democracy. Naturally, this inspiration has been labelled dangerous in many cases-and unliterary and unpoetic as well-because it challenges the established oppressive ruling powers that be. Native American poets who speak from a tradition of resistance against oppression are speaking for land and life; their poems, personal and social, are political. That's the place Indian people talk about.

Survival

In hexasyllables

by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

At night, startled by the
snowy owl who flees her
perch I waken to the
sharp sound of sleet against
the *cedar tree above*
the spring: improbable
songs by keepers of the
wind recede toward mountains,
vacant voices in the
rain holding to the sway
in our own modern world
of ghosts upon the land.

Discomposed in the wake
of a vicious winter
rain storm *the cedar tree*
above the spring recalls
the stages of its own
fallen needles. Yet, the
exact memory of a
doomed universe is
undecipherable,
surreal. Overcoming
my fear I rise to close

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the window, streaked and wet;
the holy winds are sent
to remind me I am
transient, adverse, mortal.
The best I can do is
listen to this oldest
version of the story.

In the dawn light, mountains
cradle the breath of *the*
cedar tree above the
spring, droplets taking their
places on peeled limbs like
dancers from an ancient
world, prelude to ritual.

Later I dry cuttings
taken from *the cedar*
tree above the spring and
hold in precise regard
the sacred smudging of
limbs and hair, a tribal
art meticulously
restored in our night dreams.

How did this poem begin?

This poem began because I wanted to say something about a cedar tree which I can see from the window as I sit at my typewriter. It is the only cedar in a forest of pines. The poem started without an idea and without an event, two of the most important components of many of my poems. I typed the beginning lines "The Cedar Tree Above The Spring" as the title of the poem although I rarely begin a poem with the title and perhaps I should have known that something else would emerge as the substance of the poem. As it turned out, this phrase later emerged as the repetitive refrain within the poem and I gave the poem the title "Survival."

To say something about the "ideas" which emerged, it is probably important for the reader to know that cedar is used in the purification rituals of the Dakotapi (Sioux Indians) and if the reader thinks about what that means it will help him or her to discover how some of the content came about in the writing process.

Indeed, the next lines that I typed responded to that cultural idea of purification with smoke from burning cedar; they were "sacred smudging of limbs and hair is a tribal art worth believing in," and I certainly was thinking of the recent birth of my grandson who was "baptized" in the old traditional way of the ancestors. I had no idea where to go from there with the poem.

Coincidentally, that night I was awakened in the middle of the night by a heavy wind and rain storm and I was frightened by some curious sounds like a huge bird flapping around outside in the darkness. I peered out the window but could see nothing. The storm seemed to just go on and on and I stood on an upstairs deck looking into the darkness for a long time. I was conscious of the cedar tree also standing in the darkness, listening, waiting for the storm to end.

The next morning, the storm had subsided, the sun was shining, and I worked for quite a while at my typewriter. I wrote:

Sacred smudging of limbs and hair
is a tribal art worth believing in. In the wake
of a winter rain storm, the cuttings
from *the cedar tree above the spring*, Like
dancers taking their places in an ancient
world give thanks for. . . . .

I lost the drift of my thoughts, so I started again. The next attempt looked like this:

Ever green,
timeless, *the cedar tree above the spring*
Holds an indecipherable (undecipherable?) world
in the memory of its own
fallen needles, memory of a
burdened universe;
the cedar tree above the spring,
surrounding mountains cradling its
breath, repeats the messages
sent by holy winds to tell us we will
live to a ripe old age. It is
the repeated cuttings from *the cedar tree*
above the spring that assures us of
a final smudgings of limbs and hair,
a sacred art, the dancers take their places
in an ancient world.

What changes did you make?

First drafts of poems are rarely satisfying (though I have on a couple of occasions sat down at the typewriter and found that the lines were all there, intact, ready.) and in the case of "Survival," I was at this point muddled in my thinking, and disappointed that what I wanted to say was inaccessible. As I looked at the lines, I felt that I was leaving out

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something important, i.e., the event of the storm which had been included in the first six-line attempt. I decided to start with that and re-arrange some of the other materials:

the cedar tree above the spring
At night
startled by the
snow owl who flees her perch
I waken to the sound of sleeting rain against
the cedar tree above the spring. I waken
to the song of keepers of the ash,
to the sway of ghosts upon the land.

I stand at the window loft and listen
to the re-telling of the story. Surrounding
mountains cradle its breath, give thanks
for the survival of a burdened universe.

Discomposed
in the wake of a
winter rain storm
the cedar tree above the spring
recovers the memory of its own fallen needles
and holds in precise regard the messages
sent by holy winds to tell me I will
live to a ripe old age.

The sacred smudging of limbs and hair
is a tribal art worth believing in.
Repeated cuttings from *the cedar tree above the spring* assure us that the
dancers take their places
in an ancient world.

It was at this point that I had started to grasp the idea but that my poem lacked form, structure. In desperation, I decided upon syllabic form and arbitrarily chose hexasyllables. Any port in the storm (no pun intended). Although this poem went through many more changes and I probably worked at it off and on for a couple of months, it was at this stage that the poem was nearly accessible to me.

What techniques did you use?

Modern teachers and critics of poetry often speak of "technique" when discussing poetry but I rarely know what is meant by that term unless it is pointed out to me in specific instances. In general discussion, "technique" has to do with "how" something is accomplished, or "the way" something is done. This implies that there is a systematic procedure by which a poem is created and that implication, I think, is misleading. Yet, there is a way for a poet to discuss the "principles of technique" and how they emerged in the process of writing a given poem. In my case, much of what I think might be called "technique" arises from what I know and want to express concerning Dakotah beliefs and values and experiences and imagination. Dakotah ritual is always important to me but I don't employ ritualistic "techniques" unless you would consider the repetitive refrain *the cedar tree above the spring* in that category. Ordinarily, I find repetition useful as a technique. Too, the "techniques" of storytelling are always useful, i.e., description, event, character. Robert Penn Warren, the revered man of American letters, once said that short stories destroy poems and since I am a short story writer as well as a poet, I am considering the significance of his remark. I very often create poems and short stories from the same sources although that might be a topic for another and different critical essay.

When I was writing this poem, "Survival," I was reminded of the Dakotah beliefs about wind and "hailstones." I was reminded in my own imagination of the idea that stones (like hailstones) come scattering on the tipi and Dakotah holy men sit in the darkness of the tipi with no door open and Dakotahs believe that the stones can come inside and interact with the singers. It is an ancient ritual known among us and it continues to express important beliefs about the fusing of human power and natural power. Because I am a Dakotah female I would not personally participate in such a thing but my imagination of what it all means is what assisted me in finding out what I wanted to say in the poem. I am not sure if this "process of imagination" can be called "technique," but I think it is very likely inseparable from technique. Now, how to translate that into a "systematic procedure" for writing is something that cannot be specifically expressed. How to make this imagination accessible certainly takes concentration but, more sensibly, the important thing to recognize is that the creative arts cannot be generalized. That is the nature of

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poetry. Imagination accessibility certainly takes concentration and it is this concentration which produces technique. To quote Stephen Spender, "Concentration, of course, for the purpose of writing poetry, is different from the kind of concentration required for working out a sum. It is a focusing of the attention in a special way, so that the poet is aware of all the implications and possible developments of his idea, just as one might say that a plant was not concentrating on developing mechanically in one direction, but in many directions, toward the warmth and light with all its leaves and towards the water with its roots, all at the same time." ("The Making of a Poem," by Stephen Spender "Partisan Review," XIII Summer, 1946)

So it is that different poets concentrate in different ways, and my own individual way of concentration generally comes from what I know as a Dakotah woman.

The significant event of this poem, "Survival," that is the winter rain storm turned out to be most important as a point of concentration for it is in this darkness that the poet in me awakens to some sort of truth or consciousness and it is in this truth that I survive and that I see cultural survival, thus, the title finally emerges. I suppose I am saying that survival is possible because I recognize the importance of an old purification ritual using cedar cuttings. That means, probably that this is a religious poem, at least it expresses a kind of cultural religious survival and perhaps even a personal one. That surprises me because I do not consider myself a religious person.

Northrup Frye in *Fables of Identity* said: "It is in the daylight that mankind is really in the power of darkness." By default, then, I think I am saying in this poem that it is in the darkness of such a winter rain storm that we can come to know who we are, something like the holy men who sit in the darkness of the tipi come to know about the power of the natural world and the last lines of the poem "a tribal art (is) meticulously restored in our night dreams" affirms that.

As I said before, I am always interested in the power of ritual and in this case the speculation concerning the fusing of human power with the natural power of the universe and in speculating about that, some of the beliefs concerning the wind are alluded to in the poem. I do not want to be too specific about that because I am only a poet but the lines "the holy winds are sent to remind me I am transient, adverse, mortal," the thought which came to me as I stood in the darkness that winter evening is clearly expressing a long-standing philosophical concept of the Dakotapi.

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